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TO: Chief School Administrators
Charter School Lead Persons

FROM: Christopher D. Cerf
Commissioner

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ch D Cerf".

SUBJECT: Reflections on the last three years

Over the past three years, I have had the great privilege to serve as New Jersey's Commissioner of Education. As I transition out of the Department in the coming weeks, I would like to share some reflections on our work together and the work that still lies ahead.

As I have said many times before, by far the most difficult part of my job is finding the right balance between celebrating the great successes we have experienced as a state and calling out the need to continually improve if our students are to be truly prepared for the 21st century. New Jersey consistently ranks among the top 3-4 states on the NAEP, the nation's report card, and we have among the highest graduation rates in the country. This is not by accident. We have extraordinary educators and we have made wise policy decisions over the past twenty years, including setting high academic standards since the 1990s and focusing on strong early childhood education programs.

And yet, two stark realities continue to keep me up at night. First, we know that we can do more even for many of our students who graduate with a New Jersey diploma. According to the College Board, only 43% of New Jersey students who take the SAT score at least 1550, which has been mathematically shown to equate with likely success in college courses. According to a separate analysis of the NAEP, that number is 38%. In addition, students who matriculate to community colleges in New Jersey overwhelmingly need to take remedial courses – anywhere between 57% and 92% of entering students, depending on the college.

Second, too many of our schools, especially in our urban centers, are graduating only half of their students each year. In Camden, for example, only 20% of students are proficient in reading and only half graduate in four years. I have been disappointed that so many in New Jersey accept that failure as a foregone conclusion, arguing that because of poverty we cannot do any better or that we should not be too concerned with those low achievement levels because our minority students are outperforming similar students in other states.

I reject this argument. The bar for what it means to be successful is not a relative one; it is an absolute one. We must wake up every day asking ourselves not if we can be perfect, but if we can be significantly better than we are right now. Overwhelmingly, the answer to that question is “yes.” Of course poverty matters for many of our students, and of course it affects their academic achievement. But we should never accept less for any child in New Jersey simply because of the community into which he or she is born. Schools matter. The educators within them matter. Policies and practices matter. Laws and contracts that impede the possibility of maximizing the success of all students matter. There is no silver bullet, but I look forward to the day when we move beyond incanting that we “put children first” to one where our elected officials and education leaders make every single decision on that basis.

In order to address these two problems over the past three years, we have operated under a very simple theory of action. First, we invested heavily in four key areas that are most aligned to academic success and where we believe the state should play a central role: academics, talent, performance and accountability, and innovation. Beyond that, for high performing schools, we worked to deregulate and free you to innovate and craft your own path to success. For our lowest-performing schools, however, we were more hands-on and, in the most severe cases, prepared to preserve a significant state role and implement advanced interventions.

We have not always been successful in this pursuit, but I believe we have made significant progress. Allow me to highlight a few examples.

Reorganization

One of the first actions I took as Commissioner was to completely reorganize the Department of Education to focus on our four priority areas, creating cabinet level positions around Academics, Talent, Performance, and Innovation. In addition, we created 80-plus person Regional Achievement Centers (RACs) by reprioritizing resources in order to have our staff work every day, on the ground, to support our lowest-performing schools and to implement the eight federal turnaround principles. We are now taking steps to better integrate the RACs and the existing county offices. This will help us to provide proactive and targeted support to districts and to move away from defining success as compliance with state and federal regulations.

Talent

Two years ago, Governor Christie signed a new tenure reform bill that was supported by the NJEA and approved unanimously by both houses of the legislature. This law, for the first time, ties the acquisition and loss of tenure to educator effectiveness, giving district leaders another tool to manage a high-quality team of educators. I am proud that, unlike many other states, we have undertaken a long and collaborative process to develop a new educator evaluation system that began four years ago, involved two years of pilots, and gave every district in the state a full year to build capacity before full implementation this year.

Our Talent team is focusing on much more than simply educator evaluation, however, by making important improvements to our professional development and mentoring systems. We are also focusing on improving our teacher preparation programs by working directly with our institutions of higher education and shining a light on the effectiveness and career paths of graduates of those programs.

Academics

New Jersey has had high academic standards since the 1990s. When the State Board adopted the Common Core State Standards in 2010, it set out a staged implementation timeline of three years to give districts time to adopt new curricula. During that time, we have launched an intensive plan to support

districts in making the instructional shifts required of the Common Core. This has included the creation of a free website that allows educators to upload and download instructional resources (www.njcore.org); more than 500 trainings across the state; the development of a model curriculum and formative assessment items; and the procurement of an Instructional Improvement System that will give educators seamless, integrated access to student learning records, curricular material, teacher generated lesson plans, and other collaboration tools.

We have also supported high-quality preschool programs in former Abbott districts, and, through the \$44 million Race to the Top Early Childhood grant that New Jersey received last month, we will be able to increase our reach and support for programs across the state. A recent independent study showed that students in our Abbott districts who participated in two years of pre-k remain three quarters of a year ahead of those who did not.

Performance and accountability

In 2012, New Jersey received one of the first waivers from No Child Left Behind (NCLB). This waiver allowed us to create a new accountability system that provided additional flexibility to higher performing districts while focusing support and interventions on our lowest performing schools. This process freed more than 600 schools from cascading federal requirements including setting aside 20% of Title I dollars to provide Supplemental Educational Services (SES), developing detailed improvement plans, and, in some cases, reconfiguring entire schools. In addition, these schools are now no longer required to undergo week-long CAPA site visits and periodic CAPA benchmarking meetings.

As part of our effort to provide meaningful data on school performance to support local improvement efforts, we have provided new School Performance Reports that include comprehensive measures of college and career readiness as early as elementary school and provides more meaningful peer school comparisons than the outdated DFG groupings. Through NJSMART, educators now have, at their fingertips, access to reports that help to identify at-risk students.

In addition, we have been deliberate in the transition to the new PARCC assessments, which will be much more meaningful in measuring the critical thinking skills outlined in the Common Core. Recognizing that some constituencies will always object to the pace of change, we have staged the transition to a world of greater rigor, higher expectations, and true college readiness in a responsible way. The new assessments will not come into place until five years after the adoption of the Common Core. Last year, we began to align the NJASK to the Common Core to provide a smooth instructional transition. We have committed to not making PARCC a condition of graduation for at least another five years. And, we have assured our high school educators that the new PARCC end-of-course exams will not be incorporated into evaluations for the foreseeable future, if ever.

Innovation

We remain deeply committed to providing high-quality educational options for all New Jersey students, especially those in our lowest-performing districts. Over the past three years, we have approved more than 30 new charter schools, supported the expansion of our top performing charters, and approved the state's first Renaissance School in Camden. Perhaps more importantly, however, we have created a nation-leading charter authorizing office, which has led to real accountability and the closure of 10 low-performing charter schools over the same period of time. We are also hard at work facilitating communities of innovation among schools and educators who recognize the potential of integrating ever more sophisticated technology-based learning into their pedagogy.

The education landscape is changing, and for the better. We know that there will always be some who will resist progress. But I am confident that there is a day ahead of us when interest groups, elected officials, and educators alike are truly indifferent to whether a public school is a traditional school, a charter school, a county vocational education school, or a magnet school – and ask only whether it is a good school. Similarly, I am confident that there is a day ahead of us when the question we ask is not how best to preserve the traditional manner and methods of educational governance and “delivery,” but how best to integrate the fruits of the extraordinary research and development efforts that are underway in the field.

Improving outcomes for our lowest-performing students

Over the past three years, we have focused relentlessly on improving outcomes for students who too often have been left behind. In Newark, we have taken strong steps forward with the appointment of Cami Anderson as Superintendent and a range of interventions such as the hiring of more than 30 new principals and giving a fresh start to nearly a dozen schools. We also launched a new teacher contract that ties compensation increases to performance, as opposed to the outdated lanes and steps that require increases based simply on additional degrees and years of service, neither of which is clearly shown to improve effectiveness. I commend Superintendent Anderson for her vision and indomitable commitment to children, even in the face of a campaign of misinformation and resistance organized by a small group of individuals who have a political stake in preserving the existing order of things, seemingly indifferent to the best interest of students and the choices of parents.

Last year, we intervened in the district of Camden, one of the lowest-performing districts in the country. With the appointment of Paymon Rouhanifard as the new Superintendent and the launch of his strategic plan last month, the district is on a radically different path to improvement. In partnership with the Mayor, the president of the School Board, and her colleagues, Superintendent Rouhanifard is demonstrating truly exemplary leadership in one of the toughest assignments in the history of public education reform.

In addition, 18 months ago we launched the RACs with the sole focus of supporting our struggling schools. Any initiative of this size is certain to have bumps, but these teams have formed strong partnerships with schools across the state, and I am encouraged that in many of those schools we are seeing change and real improvement. We are still in the early innings, but I have great hope for the future.

Deregulation

Last month, I shared a [memo outlining some of the steps we have taken to cut red tape and free districts and educators from a culture of excessive compliance and regulation](#). Based in part on the more than 500 recommendations of the Education Transformation Task Force, we have streamlined QSAC from 345 indicators to 52; sunsetted more than 10 data collections and migrated a number of others from a DOS based system to online collections; drastically cut down on reports and monitoring that generally are not connected to teaching and learning; and increased the flexibility to districts in both operations and programs. As outlined in last month’s memo, there is much more to come as additional deregulatory efforts move through the State Board of Education in the coming months.

I am proud of this work, and the hundreds of other things the Department of Education does every day that I haven’t mentioned – such as increased support for special education, the highest level of funding for K-12 education in the state’s history, targeted assistance during Superstorm Sandy recovery, our

nationally-recognized career and technical education effort, and the tireless work of our county offices and central staff to help educators and district leaders navigate a complicated state and federal bureaucracy.

I would like to thank Governor Christie for his vision and support. I can honestly say that there is nobody in this state more committed than the Governor to helping make sure that every child in New Jersey has access to a high-quality education, and his relentless focus and dedication has been a real inspiration to me. His commitment to the core national principle of equality of opportunity is both unshakeable and courageous.

I would also like to thank our educators and school leaders across the state who are responsible for the great successes we have had. I never forget the hard work they do with our children every day and honor them for their commitment and skill.

I would lastly like to thank my staff at the Department of Education. We have built one of the strongest teams in the country, and all of the accomplishments enumerated in this letter are because of their hard work and dedication. I am confident that all of you remain in good hands under their leadership, and am grateful for their too often anonymous efforts on behalf of New Jersey's students.

Our collective work will continue because the world around the children you serve everyday is changing, and so how we go about our work must change as well. I have been inspired every day for three years by the work of adults on behalf of New Jersey's students, and I am confident that each of you is up to the task of continuing the fight to ensure that all of New Jersey's students, regardless of birth circumstance, graduate from high school ready for college and career.

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c: Members, State Board of Education

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